

CITY OF NEWARK, NJ'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Louise Epperson - February 25, 1997

Q: This is Glen Marie Brickus. I am at the residence of Mrs. Louise Epperson. And today is February 25, 1997, and it's now approximately 3:30 p.m. And I'd just like to say to you Mrs. Epperson, thank you so much for giving us the opportunity of coming to talk with you and to make you a part of our oral history project for the Scott-Krueger Mansion African-American Cultural Center. So how are you today.

Epperson: I'm just fine, Miss Brickus. Hello, my name is Louise Epperson. Small town called Waynesburg, Georgia, about twenty-eight miles from Augusta, Georgia. My mother was Faith Michael. My father was Joseph Michael. They had three children. I was the youngest of the three. We were all born at home with midwifery.

When we moved into the ward we knew a few people, the Kendalls that lived in our ward in Oak Hills. We moved from Waynesburg, Georgia when I was only five days old. My father moved us from Georgia to Florida. There my mother also had a restaurant. My father had a barbershop. We were very blessed because we wasn't wanting for anything that our parents didn't try to give us. Even though my mother never attended church, I knew she was a Baptist because she always paid her dues and had the Baptist ministers in our restaurant. I joined the AME Methodist Church. It was Christian, and everything from a child is all I could remember because all of my friends were AME Methodist, and I wanted to go with the other children to church and to Sunday School. And this I did. We had special friends that we went off to school together. A lot of relatives had all moved away when I was a baby, and they were all living up in Boston and New York and New Jersey. We always had a family pet, my dog. My daddy was my favorite parent because he was my stepfather. My father died when I was nine days old. My stepfather was named Julius Redding. He used to work for my father in the barbershop. I would not permit anyone to comb my hair when I was five years old but my stepfather.

But when we follow those feelings. I wasn't brought up at home sitting down with a family like most families was. We had to go to the restaurant in the mornings and stay there until

about five o'clock in the evenings til my mother made us go home. We had someone to watch over us. My brother was very hard to learn. I went off to boarding school when I was in the fourth grade. My mother said that I was getting too big to run over the streets and not be in school. I went to school when I felt like it. Because if the person didn't like it, I would tell my daddy. My daddy would go to school and raise the devil, which was wrong and I was wrong. But that's what happened.

After I went to boarding school in Savannah, Georgia, my mother moved down to West Palm Beach County on the Everglades, where she also opened up another restaurant and barbershop. I was in boarding school from fourth grade on through high school. My mother tried her best to give me a very good education. And I was so dumb I could not see the trees for the houses. Because my mother worked very hard keeping us, Joe and I, in boarding school. Joe was with me all of my young life, childhood, and adult life. He was my only brother, and I loved him dearly. I did everything that I could do to keep him alive. And it seemed like part of me was gone when I lost him.

Today I only have one sister left that's resting in a nursing home in Newark. I feel sad that I don't have a home, but I could not have her in this apartment being a wheelchair patient and not financial able to support her.

She began to cry and she said. My sister, Ava, was always a singer and a dancer. She continued running away from home, joining every circus or anything that she could get as long as she could sing and dance. There was a minstrel's show that used to travel through the south. One night stands. My sister ran away and joined that show and married Silas Green from New Orleans. My sister was able to support us adequately through anything we decided we wanted to have. She would send it to us. But we thought she was very rich, not knowing what richness meant at that time. My mother did not allow me to go visit with my sister at all. So I knew very little about being very, very close to her like I was with Joe. Though I know I always had her. She always sent me everything when I was in boarding school. I loved her very dearly then as I do now.

When I came to Newark, I knew nothing about politics or anything. I came here to live with my sister. She had left the stage and had come to New York to dance on the stage show. I

came to New York to visit with her and to stay with her. I knew nothing about politics. My aunt lived in Newark, New Jersey. I came over here as soon as I got into Newark. The AME Church was so far away, I would get lost trying to find it. I joined the Clinton Avenue Presbyterian Church. At that time, it was known as Thirteenth Avenue Presbyterian Church. It is the only black Presbyterian Church in Newark. I became very active in the church and formed a youth group that kept the youth in church instead of in the streets. We had a lot of fun together. I was young and they were younger. I did a lot of church work in those days that I got a big kick out of doing

I also joined a politician group. And I was the only one in the politician group that was a Republican. All of them were Democrats. And they wondered why would I be a Republican. I told them because that was what I could always remember my mother was, a Republican.

I worked in Newark very hard. I worked for five dollars a week during the Depression. All of the old gang from the church used to stop by my house because I happened to have a piano in my house. And all the gang that played music stopped by and practiced. I would cook and serve them lunches. And we had a lot of fun. No money, but just a lot of fun.

When the WPA started with Franklin Delano Roosevelt, that's when I became very interested in politics.

Q: I just want to say thank you Mrs. Epperson again for that beautiful tape that you had already done which has become a part of our current interview. So I'm going to ask you some additional questions to get some additional information from you as a part of our Scott-Krueger Mansion Project. You've told me a lot about your coming to Newark and about your childhood. I have thoroughly enjoyed this. I must tell you that. But now, let me ask you this. Where did you first live when you came to Newark?

Epperson: I lived on Orange Street with my aunt.

Q: How long did you stay there?

Epperson: I stayed there about a year.

Q: What was your first impression of Newark when you first came here?

Epperson: Oh, I thought Newark was just the place to be. I thought it was just out of sight. I loved it.

Q: So it was as much and more than you had really expected?

Epperson: Yes. It was.

Q: What was the housing like where you lived on Orange Street? Was it a boarding house, an apartment house, single family house, or just what kind of house was it?

Epperson: Well, when I lived with my aunt, my aunt owned her own home. She owned the first tavern in the City of Newark.

Q: The first tavern?

Epperson: Yes. When, I don't know how to put it.

Q: Prohibition was ended.

Epperson: Right.

Q: When people could not buy liquor, then she was one among the first.

Epperson: She was among the first to own a tavern.

Q: That's interesting.

Epperson: Yes.

Q: What was the neighborhood like? Was it a commercial area, like where shops and businesses and factories were located, or was it a residential area?

Epperson: It was a residential area.

Q: What other kinds of people lived there? Just like were they upper middle class black folk, or were they poor black folk, or was it a mixed neighborhood?

Epperson: It was a mixed neighborhood.

Q: With black and white living in the same neighborhood?

Epperson: Yes.

Q: Okay. Why did you settle in that neighborhood?

Epperson: I settled in that neighborhood because my aunt lived there, and I liked the people around. Everybody was friendly. Nobody had an awful lot, but we had each other.

Q: Where did you live next in Newark and why did you move to that place?

Epperson: Well, I moved into my own apartment. I thought I was getting up in the world then. I moved from my family to my own apartment on James Street in Newark.

Q: What was the housing like there?

Epperson: Well, it wasn't elaborate as my aunt's home. We had a toilet with running water on the back porch. And we had a shower, but no bath. But it was good living.

Q: What was that neighborhood like?

Epperson: Well, most people in that neighborhood were poor like me.

Q: Were there any whites living there?

Epperson: No. There was no whites living around there.

Q: Where did you do your shopping in Newark?

Epperson: Well, on Orange Street there were neighborhood stores. I didn't know what it was to go to the supermarket in those days because all of the neighborhoods had mom and papa stores that we shopped in.

Q: Who owned those stores? Were they whites or?

Epperson: Whites. Whites owned the stores. Blacks did not own em.

Q: Okay. And it was because of convenience that you shopped in those stores. What about your clothing and household things that you might have needed? Where did you buy those things?

Epperson: Well, we would go downtown when we had money and shop at Bamberger's, Ohrbach's, places like that.

Q: You said that the merchants in the neighborhood were all white folk.

Epperson: Yup. Mostly Jews.

Q: Did they hire blacks in their stores?

Epperson: Not at that time. We could go there and they would give us credit if we didn't have any money.

Q: Did the people in the neighborhood resent those Jews because they owned stores in the neighborhood? Was there any kind of racial attitude?

Epperson: There was no racial disturbance in those days. Though many people resented them having stores and not hiring any blacks.

Q: How was this resentment shown? What did they do to show that they resented having those people?

Epperson: We didn't do anything. We just talked about it. We did what we're doing today, nothing. [Laughter]

Q: Did the local stores offer people credit in the neighborhood?

Epperson: Yes. We could get credit.

Q: Was that one of the reasons why you would shop in those stores?

Epperson: Why yes. Didn't have any money to get it from other places. Nobody else was around to let us have it.

Q: When you came to Newark, were you able to buy dry goods and foods that you were

accustomed to having before you came to Newark?

Epperson: Yes. The foods was about the same. The same as you had in the south. Just with different names for the food. We always white potatoes ash potatoes. When I asked for ash potatoes, they didn't know what I meant.

Q: What do you know about the appearance or what was referred to as soul food, or did you ever hear that term soul food at that time?

Epperson: Well, we having come from the deep south, we always called southern cooking soul food. And I knew a lot about soul food having been brought up with a restaurant, you know, in our family.

Q: What were some of the foods that you ate customarily in the south and referred to it as soul food?

Epperson: Well, we had pork chops. We had hamburgers. We had beef stew. Pig feet, pig ears. And always had hog chittlings that the white folks wouldn't eat in those days. So we got them free from the slaughter houses. Because white people didn't eat em. Always had collard greens. Always.

Q: Sweet potatoes.

Epperson: Sweet potatoes, corn bread, black eyed peas, string beans.

Q: So when you came to Newark, you found that the people in the neighborhoods where you settled still ate those kinds of foods.

Epperson: Still ate like that. Yes.



Q: Did the people in Newark dress any differently than you could remember people dressing in the south?

Epperson: No. They dressed comparably the same.

Q: Were relatives and friends as helpful and supportive here in Newark as they had been in your home?

Epperson: Well, not the same. Because were a little cautious outbound when I first came to Newark. In the south everybody spoke to you, and you were welcomed by just everybody, especially if you were from out of town.

Q: Would you say that you became a part of an extended family when you came to Newark?

Epperson: Yes. That is correct.

Q: Did you call people aunt and cousin or uncle here in Newark?

Epperson: Yes. Yes. My Aunt Blanche and my Cousin John and my Uncle so and so.

Q: But were these family relatives or were they just people in the neighborhood that you honored by calling them uncle and?

Epperson: Well, really some of them are relatives. Most of them relatives. Most of them are relatives.

Q: You know, when I grew up in the south, we always referred to older people or senior citizens as Aunt Mary, Aunt Sally, or Uncle Tom, Uncle Jim --

Epperson: We did too.

Q: -- and I was just wondering if the people in the neighborhood still did that Did they call people who were not blood relatives refer to them as uncle and aunt?

Epperson: Yes. And they would whoop just as quick as your own relatives if you did something wrong.

Q: Were such events as the birth and weddings and funerals observed differently here in Newark than they were, than you remember from the south?

Epperson: No. They were the same as far as I can remember.

Q: Were holidays like Christmas, Easter, Fourth of July and Thanksgiving celebrated differently in Newark than they were in your home?

Epperson: Why yes in a way. Because during the holidays, whatever holidays it was, you would go from house to house, and they would have big tables of food, and cakes and pies. And we could all go anybody's house and have that for the holidays.

Q: And after, when you came to Newark, how did you find those kinds of celebrations?

Epperson: I found that we had to know somebody and had to be invited to their house if we could eat or not.

Q: How did the use of such items as liquor, drugs and tobacco in Newark compare with their use in your home town?

Epperson: Well, there were a lot of people dipping snuff and using chewing tobacco in my home.

A lot of people. The younger people all smoked, but the older people used snuff and chewing tobacco. I've never used either one, anyplace.

Q: When you came to Newark, did you find the use comparable in Newark as it was in the south?

Epperson: Yes, I find it pretty comparable in Newark.

Q: Miss Epperson, how did the use of such as home remedies and patent medicines and midwives in Newark compare with the use of such in the south?

Epperson: Well, in the south we knew that we had to have midwifery, and everybody knew that. That's the way my neighborhood and everybody else's neighborhood down there was set up. But you had a lot of help from everybody. I found when I came up here you had to learn and sort of struggle for yourself.

Q: What about patent medicines, medicines that you buy over the drugstore counter, did they?

Epperson: Well, where I come from we did a lot of teas and things. You'd go in the woods and dig roots and make different teas. Old Indians would show us different roots and things that were good for things. Arthritis and sassafras tea and all kind of roots we'd dig up for different things that was wrong. Here you had to go the drugstore to look for stuff that compared to it.

Q: How did the belief, did you know anybody who believed in the practice of such things as conjure, voodoo, whodo and roots?

Epperson: I had heard of such things, but I was never a believer. I never followed any such doctrines. But I knew many people who did.

Q: Did you hear of any such after you had come to Newark?

Epperson: Oh yes. There were the same thing here that was down south. When I first come to Newark, people used to take carloads of people going back south to get jacaranda root or to get numbas, all that stuff. That's the truth.

Q: And the Seven Sisters in New Orleans. Did you ever hear about the Seven Sisters of New Orleans?

Epperson: No, I didn't know about them, but I knew about so many others.

Q: How were pets regarded in Newark in comparison with your southern home? Did you have pets when you were in the south?

Epperson: Yes. I always had a dog. Always.

Q: What about after you came to Newark?

Epperson: I had a dog in Newark. I've always had pets. Always a dog. Until I moved here.

Q: How did the incidents of crime in Newark compare with that in your southern home, and what about crimes involving juveniles?

Epperson: Well, we didn't have juveniles down there like they had juveniles up here. If you were a juvenile and you were a teenager coming up in the south and you did something wrong, my mother's friends would whoop me. Everybody had, as they say it takes a whole village to raise a child. Everybody had a hand in bringing that child up. And if they saw you doing something wrong, they reported and they whooped you too if they caught you. And you'd get home, you'd get a second whipping. Like here, the parents want to fight you about the children. Down there that never would happen.

Q: Right. Right. What was your perception of blacks helping each other in Newark, and did it compare favorable with blacks helping each other in the south?

Epperson: No, I did not. Blacks didn't help each other when I came here. You had to get it for yourself. In the south, everybody was willing to give you a hand.

Q: How would overall relations with white folks in Newark compare to relations with whites in your southern home?

Epperson: I had no relations with white in my home. Thinking a lot. I never because my mother was always in business, and when we got big enough to work, we had to help her. So I had no relationship with whites in the south.

Q: Do you recall any traditional kinds of activities that you did in the south, and you found the same thing happening here in Newark? As a matter of fact, in the south did you have picnics and cookouts and?

Epperson: We had what's known as hayrides in the south. We would take hayrides and we would go down to the lake or to the river. And it was fish, and cook it right at that place. As night came, we'd take flame [?] and stick them to the palm trees for lights. And that's the way we enjoyed ourselves. We had wonderful times doing that.

Q: So what did you do when you, what did you find people doing in Newark that compared with those activities in the south?

Epperson: Well, I didn't find anything in the north that compared with activities we had in the south. When I came to Newark, I thought it was great to run to taverns and go to church. Those are the two main things that I did. [Laughter] That's true. Church work and taverns. We just had a lot of fun doing that.

Q: How were you received or how were you treated by African-Americans who had lived in Newark for a long time?

Epperson: Well, I was treated fairly well because my parents, not my mother and father, but my aunts and uncles and things had moved up here, had lived up here for years. And, of course, I was introduced as a member of the family. And people treated me very nice.

Q: Do you know of any part of Newark where people from your home town settled?

Epperson: Nope. I don't know of any part. In fact, I don't know anybody in Newark from my home town, but my family.

Q: Louise, what kind of work did you do in the south before you came to Newark?

Epperson: I didn't do any work except for my mother. I never worked for anybody in the south.

Q: What was your first job in Newark and how did you get it?

Epperson: My first job in Newark, my friend asked me if I would hold a job for her while she tried to get a better job. Because she didn't want to lose that job. It was a part-time job. I had never been in a white person's house to work, and I was very nervous and excited over it. And she said I could do it, and I did it. I did all the cleaning. I did the cooking. And I received five dollars a week.

Q: So that was a domestic job.

Epperson: Domestic job.

Q: How long did you do that?

Epperson: I didn't do it very long. I guess I did it a couple of years or more. I guess it was about that time. Then I got a second domestic job working for Dr. Swaine on Roosevelt Avenue. And I thought I was really coming into something then because I started off with twenty-five dollars a week. I was his receptionist, and when the people would all leave the office, he would come into the house. Then I would take my uniform that I was a receptionist in and change into another uniform and cook dinner.

Q: How did you regard both of those jobs? Given your background and your experience, what did you think of doing that kind of work when you came here?

Epperson: I hated the day job that I did for that five dollars a week. But working for Dr. Swaine, Mrs. Swaine and the doctor and the two children treated me very, very nice at all times. And I began to think that they were like a family.

Q: How far was this job from where you lived, and how did you get to work?

Epperson: Well, I lived on Orange Street and James Street. So it wasn't very far that I had to go to go Roosevelt. I'd walk over there.

Q: What were the conditions like? Well, you just talked to me about how well Dr. Swaine and his family treated you, but what kind of hours did you work?

Epperson: Well, I started to work seven o'clock in the morning, and I worked until after dinner at night.

Q: What groups did you, well there were no groups. What was your next job after you left Dr. Swaine?

Epperson: When I left Dr. Swaine, there again, the same girl wanted me to hold her job for her

until she went to Greystone to put in for a job. I held her job for her and worked for Boschen in Montclair doing the same type of work, except I drove him to New York every morning as a chauffeur and come back at night and fix dinner. And I worked for him for ten years before he passed.

Q: Who was this?

Epperson: Boschen B O S C H E N Otto Boschen.

Q: Were you ever unemployed Ms. Epperson?

Epperson: No. No. When I left Boschen, I got a job at Western Electric. I worked in Western Electric for five years. When I left Western Electric, I went to Willowbrook State School. I worked at Willowbrook State School, I worked up from being an aide on the ward to being a supervisor of the youths opportunity program, whereby I would teach the youth how to work and how to stay in school. I would check with the guidance counsel every week to see that these children were up on their grades, and if they were not up on their grades, I had the privilege to hire and fire them for Willowbrook State School in New York. And I worked there until I came to Newark to work.

Q: What were the common occupations for black men and women in Newark when you first came here?

Epperson: Well, a lot of people were working at the shipyards. The shipyards were open. The flower houses were open. Western Electric had started to hiring a lot of people Bell Telephone started to hiring people. It was just a conglomeration of things opening up for people that wanted to work.

Q: So people, black men and women, moved from domestic jobs and common labor jobs into



these other jobs like at Western Electric and RCA and all of these places.

Epperson: Absolutely. Right. Absolutely.

Q: Louise, do you have any pictures or any kind of mementos, maybe letters of recommendation, that you might have gathered along the way from the time you came to Newark until?

Epperson: I had a lot of that stuff, but to keep it. But I still have a lot of. You see the big boxes of things. But I would never know how to go about finding it.

Q: You talked to me about when --

END SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

Q: Your experience when you first came to Newark, and we talked about Presbyterian, Thirteenth Avenue Presbyterian Church, which I think was one of the beautiful edifices that I had ever seen when I first came to Newark. I live in that neighborhood. And then you went, the church moved from there to Clinton Avenue and became Clinton Avenue Presbyterian Church. And tell me again about your experiences. Precisely what did you do as a worker in the church?

Epperson: Well, when I went, when the church moved over to Clinton Avenue, we had a white minister, Reverend Collington. Reverend Collington's wife was always a friend of me. Because I had been in the big school fight. And she, Jesse Washington was living then, and he was a great deacon in our church that had a great deal to say. And when they elected me, he offered my name, and they elected me to be the head of women's work. When the pastor's wife needs anything. So I was still the head of women's work. And I stayed president of the women's work for quite a few years until I had a heart attack. When I had a heart attack, Vickie Booker, who was also a trustee or a deacon at the church, she came to the hospital with a paper and asked me. She told me that the pastor's wife told her to ask me if I would sign from being, that I resigned

from being the president of women's work because I was sick and they didn't want me to suffer with all of this heavy load on me. And they had someone else that they could appoint as president of the women's work. I said, if you don't want me, that's fine. But I know I have served you well. And she asked me in the hospital. And I said, but if you brought the paper to me and it came from the church that I accept it and sign it. And that's what I did. And years later Mrs. Collington met me taking a course at Rutgers where she taught school also. Mrs. Collington told me then that she owed me an apology because what she thought I was about, she find out that I was not about that but I was sticking out and she respected my judgment now. And she regrets that she had turned some of the women from my church against me. But that didn't bother me because I joined the church but not the minister.

Q: Did you play any other roles in Presbyterian?

Epperson: Well, I worked on the usher board. I was one of the ushers there. In fact, I had pictures from the usher board and pictures from the youth group that I helped to establish and work with. I turned them in when we had our anniversary and marched back to the old site last year. I turned them into my church as I did many pictures and books and things, projects that I worked on in the church.

Q: So you are still a member of Clinton Avenue Presbyterian Church.

Epperson: Still a member of Clinton Avenue Church.

Q: Who would you consider as having been outstanding as ministers of Thirteenth Avenue Presbyterian and then Clinton Avenue Presbyterian?

Epperson: Well, I will always think that there's nobody that's ever more outstanding that Reverend Ellison. That's the minister that I joined the church under. And he was one of the great, great black ministers of the Presbyterian. He brought people into the church to speak to us from all over

the south and everywhere. And I always respected him and always remember him as a great.

Q: How much have you participated in social and cultural activities in Newark? And what social and cultural clubs or organizations, for instance like the Eastern Star or bridge clubs or literary societies or choral ensembles or benevolent associations, have you ever done any work in any of those?

Epperson: Yes. I worked for years as an Eastern Star. I was a juvenile Eastern Star before I ever came to Newark. Down south. I came to Newark, I joined Queen Esther, Esther Court, that's on Springfield Avenue. And I worked up from that court, from a regular member to being the matron of Queen of Sheba Chapter. After I gave up being the matron of Queen of Sheba Chapter, I served as the treasurer. I served on all the points. I served as the associate matron. I joined not only the Eastern Stars, but I joined the Daughters of Sphinx, the Herrons, the Nikes. There's one more, but I can't think of it.

Q: Do you know the history of any of those organizations? How they began, when they began, who began them?

Epperson: Yes. I do know that. I have the history around here of the Queen of Sheba. We began in a house. When I first joined it, Nellie Greer was the first matron that I joined. Who later became the grand matron, and who later bought the building on Springfield Avenue that we now meet in. She was a great woman.

Q: When did you, you said you came to Newark as a junior Eastern Star?

Epperson: Yes.

Q: When did you join those other organizations?

Epperson: Well, after I joined Queen of Sheba which is the oldest chapter in all of the Eastern Stars in Newark for black folks I know. I was asked to join different ones. And, of course, I wanted to go higher up. And every time I was offered to go higher up into another part of the order, I did. Each year I took another step higher.

Q: Who were some of the outstanding leaders in any of those organizations that you named?

Epperson: Oh well, I'm telling you that's such a fine group of men and women that it would be very. I just couldn't say who was outstanding. Because to me they're all outstanding and I respect them all.

Q: I see. How much have you participated in political activities in Newark?

Epperson: Well, I've never been a politician though I've always. People acquaint me with being a politician. I don't think that I was really a politician. I have registered people to vote. I worked on the polls. Because I always thought it was my duty as a citizen to do these things.

Q: Did you ever belong to any political organizations?

Epperson: Well, I did join the Democrat Party. That's about the only that I joined.

Q: I remember you having said on the tape that you had at first that you were a Republican.

Epperson: Yes. I was a Republican until I started the fight with the med school. When I started the fight with the med school, I tried to get everybody in the city and the state and the county and the federal government to help me. I went to everybody. Everybody gave me the runaround. To go to this one, and go to that one. And it was, can't remember names very easy now.

Q: Well, we're going to talk about that experience in a little while. And I want to ask you to give

me a running narrative of your experience with that med school project from the beginning, but not at the moment. I have some other things I want to talk. And then when I get to that, I just want you to, I'm not going to ask any questions. I'm going to listen to you tell me about that experience. But I did want to know that you are now a Democrat.

Epperson: And that experience caused me to be a Democrat because I could get the Democrats to do for me what my Republicans down in Washington and down in Trenton would not do. That was come up to Newark and listen and see what we had to say. And I swore then that I would never, ever vote Republican again.

Q: Okay. Now we come to the community activities, and that was one of the reasons I was so anxious to interview you because I knew of your activities, your participation, and your determination when you worked with that project. And I just think that that's something that coming generations ought to know about. So how much have you participated in community activities? And as I said before, I'm just going to listen and you can tell me anything that you want me to know about what you have done on a community basis since you've been in Newark.

Epperson: Yes, I've done a lot of community work. I've helped the children. I helped with elders. I helped with people that were disabled. Wasn't old and wasn't young, but just disabled.

Q: When you, let me just ask you, when you say helped those persons, precisely what are you talking about?

Epperson: I'm talking about I have saw that those people got some help, some welfare, or some food stamps or things like that that they really needed. Kept their children for em while they went out do a day's work. Things like that. I call that neighborhood work.

Q: Right.

Epperson: And I have registered people for voting. And went out to talk to community folk to let them know the importance of voting and being registered, and using the registration. There are many people that have registered that won't come out and vote. And I have used my car and my own self to take people to the polls so that they would vote. Cause I always think that a vote is a terrible thing to waste.

Q: How did that experience with the medical school start in Newark and what was your role there?

Epperson: Well, I have been accused of many things about that medical school. Some of them is true and some of them are not. The first thing I remember reading about the med school coming into Newark, it was called the College of Medicine and Dentistry at that time. Of course, the name has changed several times. When I read on Sunday morning's paper headlines, we had two newspapers in Newark then, the Newark Evening News and the Star Ledger.

Q: Right.

Epperson: It said that this school was gonna move into Newark regardless of what anyone said, and they were coming from Jersey City because they was running Jersey City broke. So they were going to come into Newark, and first think they were gonna do was to blight all the land that they wanted. And they wanted something like over three hundred acres of land at that time. And they had already blighted part of Twelfth Avenue where I lived, and one side of the street was blighted. And they called that urban renewal. Well I say it looks like Negro removal than urban renewal, you know. How can they take our homes without inviting us to a meeting? How can they take our property away from us and we don't know what's happening, and just say we'll give you fifty cents for it. It's all it's worth. They blighted it whether you wanted it. And if you don't take it, we'll take it over making it eminent domain and put it aside for you, but still take your house. And I said, well, when they do that, it will be over my dead body. I will not stand for that.

So I started to go out from door to door. From climbing up the third and fourth flights

asking people to come out, and let's have a meeting and talk about it. And the first meeting was held at my house, and everybody said that I should be the chairman of the group. Well, I didn't know what being the chairman meant, but it meant a lot of hard, hard work.

I met a fellow that people never even knew existed, Jack Hicks. I don't know if you remember Jack Hicks. He was a big Democrat man. He was in the Adenizio administration. I always knew Larry Starks, but Larry wasn't with us because she was working for Adenizio, and Adenizio was who we were fighting. Because Adenizio said he was tired of eating the crumbs from the table. He was gonna to sit down to a full course meal.

Q: That was Mayor Hugh Adenizio that you're talking about?

Epperson: That's right. Absolutely. And I told him he would not eat his full course meal on the backs of us. That we were definitely going to fight him. We gave house rent parties to try to get a lawyer. We had no money. We got, everybody tried to, everybody joined in the fight. My house began to be too small to hold the people. I asked the AFL-CIO, they had a place up on Tenth Street near Avon Avenue, if we could hold a meeting over there. And it was at the Weston time and he said yes. But when we got there, the building was locked up, and there was no sign of life or anything. But I happened to have the president's number. He had given me. And I called him, and he came from Fairfield to open the door. But the building was still like ice. Many people had waited out with the children and everything., But we still held our meeting anyway in the cold building.

I asked to see the Mayor. I asked for an audience with him, and he said yes he would meet with me. And I went up to his office, and he had different black folks hid in different places that could hear the conversation between me and him. And I thought it was just he and I, up and up, talking. And he told me that what was I so angry about? I should be happy that Newark was going to get a full meal instead of the crumbs from the table like they had been getting.

Q: Now who was this who did this?

Epperson: Hugh Adenizio, the mayor, that's who I met with. So I told him. He said, if you had any sense, you'd stop fighting me. You'd stop fighting the city because I can get you more money for your house than has been offered. So if you had any sense, you'd take the big amount of money, go buy you another house someplace else. Cause we're gonna have that land. I said, well what are you gonna do for my neighbors. You're telling me if I close my mouth, what I'd get. What are you gonna do for my neighbors? He said, there you go again thinking about your neighbors. He said, don't think about your neighbors. Think of what I'm telling you for yourself. I said, I don't want it. And I hit his desk and knocked the papers and things off. I said, if I can't have it for everybody, then I don't want it. You can forget about it. And I will still fight you.

And I left out of that office. At that time they used to have in East Tavern a little cage that the girls would come and stand up and shake in. I went from tavern to tavern that night. After every girl shook, I asked the manager could I get in the cage and speak to the folks. I got up in the cage and I told them I couldn't shake, but I wanted to shake their brains up so they could know what was happening in Newark. And I talked to them about the med school agreement with the mayor and not the people. I said the government's supposed to be of the people, for the people and about the people. Now how are we being left out of everything? These are our homes I didn't think a person could come up and take your home after you worked and struggled and paid for it. I was getting ready for retirement then, but I couldn't retire til twenty years later. Everybody would come to a meeting when I would call a meeting.

We go down, ask the Governor, Hughes was the Governor of New Jersey, if he would send Paul Yavosocki and Chancellor Becken, they were in the department of, I forgot the name, what they call it, in Trenton at that time. I asked him if he would send them up here to Newark to intercede. He said I could come down to Trenton, but they couldn't send them up here. And I got a busload of people. We gave three house parties in order to raise the funds. We called them house rent parties. And we sold fish and chicken and stuff like that and paid for the buses for the people to go down to Trenton.

We went down there, then I told them that this is my last trip coming to Trenton. Because they had a big office building on Raymond Blvd. in Newark that could hold all the tenants to Newark, and we could not come to Trenton any more. They would have to use what the State



had, that office building down there. And we began to have meetings down there. Well, this thing had gotten so big and so far out of hand, people were coming from all over everywhere. If we called a meeting for seven o'clock at night, you had to be there five o'clock to get a seat. The place was so filled up with people. But I had real workers fighting, helping me.

People like our past mayor, our present mayor, Harry Wheeler, Police Department Sunny, the Black Panthers, Rutgers students and some Connecticut, I think it was Connecticut, the law school was and brought Julius Williams, and all of Ewing. All of those people came down to give a hand. And we really. You talk about togetherness. We had togetherness in this city.

Q: When you talk about the past mayor and the present mayor, that was Mayor Kenneth Gibson and Mayor Sharpe James?

Epperson: Right.

Q: I see.

Epperson: Right. And Grant.

Q: The Reverend Rap Grant.

Epperson: Yes. The Reverend Rap Grant was always there with the people to help and do all that he could. And I remember the days that he didn't have anything but selling pots and pans out of the back of his car, but he was there with the people. Always there. And when we had no place to meet, you could always depend upon Reverend Hendall Hayes. He had just come to Newark. He opened his church for us. We went into the church and had many, many meetings. He was always for us.

We had a tough time for the simple reason people that got big, big jobs now, they got those jobs standing on the shoulder of a little people like me. And after they got their big jobs and all, they forgot that we even existed. I was thinking about Black History Month, this month. We are

never mentioned in anything. You can always see Robert Coupler of somebody talking about Miss Rhapsody and talking about Sissey Houston and people like that. But they forgot people like Harry Smith, who was on Broadway in Black and Blue for over two years. And they forgot about, I have a whole list of names I was sitting there trying to think of the other night. And as I thought about them, it's there where that red box is. Wrote in red. No, on the table. Yes. Give me that red box over there, please.

Q: Keep talking.

Epperson: The paper that's under it. Thank you. See now that I'm getting old, I have to write things down in order to remember. I was thinking about Charlie Matthews who did so much for this town. Ken Stills, Lawrence Roberts, Robert Banks and the Savvoy Recording Company, Leon Lumpkin, Bank Brothers, the Fitch family, Loren Bears, Connie Pitts at that time. And I think I mentioned Harry. But you never hear anything about Jack Hicks, Trial Braker, Russell Bingo. These are just people around doing things for other people. Trying to help with jobs or trying to keep the jobs. But today it's worse now than then. People just don't come up to do or so.

At that time I was working at Willowbrook State School. Every other day I was calling my supervisor saying I can't come in. Please keep my job for me. But I've got to go to court. I've got to fight here. I've got to do this, I got to do the other. And he said, Miss Epperson, listen to me kindly. He said, what you are doing is gonna surely be part of history. He said, I will never be a person to keep you from it. He said, you will never lose your sick time nor your compensatory time or anything. He said, you won't lose that. He said, just take your time and make history. And I thought that was so nice. I thought that was so nice.

Now when I went to the Governor, who Governor Hughes, I wrote to the Senator, Republican Senator down in Washington, and I asked him if he would come in to help us. He answered my letter and told me it seemed to him that it was a city affair and that it was a State affair, and that I could get that help in Trenton. I wrote to Trenton and they told me it was a city affair and not a State affair. I said, well, I wrote a letter and I called daily trying to get through to the president, who was then Dr. Cavinet, of the med school. And I could never pass his secretary.

could never past his secretary. I didn't know what was the next step was going to be. I wrote Bell Telephone. They had a wonderful, wonderful community service at that time. I wrote them because I came home one day and my telephone was cut off and I didn't owe a bill. And I couldn't understand why. And I tried everything I knew to try to get my phone put back and I could not get it on. I went to Bell Telephone meeting and I met a black supervisor, I can't think of his name, and I explained my dilemma to him, what was happening to me. And he said, give me your name and your phone number Tomorrow morning you'll have your phone back. I said, thank you, sir, and he did. My heat was cut off. Somebody broke the lock on my outside tank, had a lock on the street where they put the oil in the house. The broke that lock off and poured water in it.

I was in a very, very bad situation. Every other night my windows in my car was blown out with rifle pellets I'd pick off the floor. I had to go down to the medical school and park my car in their lot at night. Couldn't leave it in front of my door. These are harassments of things that they did to me in this med school agreement. I could not get a lawyer in the whole city to represent us. I wanted to have a lawyer for a show cause, why would you do your citizens this way. But I could not get a lawyer for love nor money. So finally somebody told me about a lawyer in Elizabeth. I went over to get him and he wanted an awful lot of money that we did not have.

God bless the day, but Harry Wheeler said, let's try to get the NAACP, their legal aid office in New York City. And Gus Henninberg was the head of it. And I said, well, Gus is in Newark because of the med school agreement. He came over to help us. And Gus thought, he thought I was a mad woman the way I was carrying on so. Well, I guess I was acting like a mad woman. And I can say one thing, when the ball started rolling, people start joining and giving a hand. And when they called in the State Troopers, into Newark, I was very upset. Very, very upset. One of the worst things I thought that could have happened. There was a black minister living across from me on Twelfth Avenue on the opposite side of the street. He came up the street running. And I said, Reverend, what? And he said, Miss Epperson, Miss Epperson.

Q: Miss Epperson, I believe you were talking about some of the problems that you had when they were trying to establish the med school in Newark. And you were talking about the hard time that

you had being able to communicate people with people in Trenton and Newark in order to get some kind of consideration for the community.

Epperson: Yes. I had contacted everyone that I possibly could in higher, upper powers. Then the riots broke out. Everybody that I tried to contact before this happened, everyone, everyone, including the Governor, including the president from the College, Dr. Cavinet, including Chancellor Dunkins, Paul Yavosocki, they all came to my door to see what they could do to sit down for a community meeting in the City of Newark and if I could call I said, I can't call them off. I didn't call them on. You know, you did that not me. You called the State Troopers in here. You barbed wired our city off where nobody could come in or go out. I didn't do those things. You did it. And people are dead, and I'm feeling very sad and very low because it could have been avoided if you'd have only took time to meet with me. I was willing to come anyplace to meet with you so that we could settle this thing before it got this far, with all the dead people and the hospital, all they could find in some of the dead people's pockets was my name and telephone number. And I didn't even know who the people were. But it gave me a very sad feeling. It gave me a feeling that I can't express to you.

After we had that meeting, I was the first black that they appointed to the Board of Health down in Trenton, to sit on, so that I could keep them abreast of what was happening. I was the first black non-professional person appointed to Supreme Court, even before Connie Wood went for it. I was the first. And I didn't understand what they would be talking about, but I'd hold up every meeting. And say you wasn't always that educated. Now cmon down the ladder and talk to me where I can understand it. And they did. I sat on that group for five years. I was instrumental, after the riots, in talking to the president of the college. He came to my door. I couldn't even get to see him before, secretary kept me out. But he came to my door, and then his door was always, an open door policy for me. And everybody knew I could walk in that college.

END SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE; BEGIN SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

Q: Okay, Miss Epperson, we were talking about your experiences in trying to get consideration

for our people when they were in the process of trying to get the University of Medicine and Dentistry established in Newark. And I think what I'd like to ask you now is what happened. You said that they had wanted approximately some three hundred acres and they came down to much less than that. Well, let me just do this. You had said at the beginning that they had wanted some three hundred acres for the College of Medicine and Dentistry, but in the final analysis they built the institution on much less ground than that. And I am thoroughly convinced that it was primarily because of your effort. So once they had settled on how much land they needed or wanted or would settle for, then what happened in terms of getting the University built in Newark?

Epperson: Well, it was a struggle. As I told you that Gus Henninberg came over. I had an enormous call from coming from Morristown, and I promised to never to divulge the man's name or who it was, but he offered to help us because he could see that we were in a bind. You see the College was offered three hundred acres of land in Morristown, and all they had to do was to cut down trees. They didn't have to displace anyone. But they didn't want that because they couldn't guinea pig on the trees. They wanted to guinea pig on the people. And I didn't want them to come to Newark even though we were called the highest mortality rate, the highest this, the highest that in the medial field. I didn't want them to come to Newark because I didn't want them to use the citizens as guinea pigs, and they wouldn't do that anyplace else.

So when they offered me the job, I didn't want to take the job because I didn't want the constituents to feel that I was out there fighting for a job. I didn't want the job. I didn't want to lose the pulse of the people that I was working with.

Q: Right.

Epperson: And they said, oh Miss Epperson, I don't care what nobody said, we want you to come to Newark. I said, well, if I come to Newark, I'll have to come a patient relation person and be responsible to you and not to the college. And I don't know if they'll want to pay me for that. So I went in to see Dr. Cavinot, and they told me that I could write my own bill. That they didn't have a bill for such title as patient relations. And I'm happy that I wrote the first patient relations bill in

the medical history, and it was sent to Chicago and they adopted it. And it became patient relations at all hospitals. Now we don't have any. We've gone backwards. We had nine people working in patient relations when I worked in the health system. Now there's not one person that you can report mistreatment if there are any. I don't know. I'm not there. But I know people continue to call me about the treatment that they receive, at all hospitals sometimes. I have had to call different hospitals about treatment of different people. I still have to do that sometimes.

Q: How long did you work as patient relations coordinator at the University?

Epperson: I worked there from 1968 up until seven years ago.

Q: Til seven years ago?

Epperson: Yes.

Q: Ma'amm, just let me ask you this. After all of that, those problems, and all of the negotiation, all of the land that they wanted to take, do you have any idea now approximately how many people were displaced for the hospital to come in there?

Epperson: I really couldn't tell you how many people that were displaced. Because every day some people were moving away, some people were actually dying. Some people were moving to the South Ward, and they were still having tough times because they moved in a residential neighborhood that only wanted one families to live in it, and they couldn't afford to pay the high cost of the tax and the rent and had to put two and three families. And they were running into difficulties. All those types of things. I really couldn't tell you. But I do know that people were having a hard time.

Q: Did they, did any of the people that moved out, whose homes were demolished, were they paid for their homes or did the State declare eminent domain?

Epperson: No. They were paid, but they were paid very little, including me. Because I think I would have got thirteen thousand dollars for my home, and the house that I bought cost me twenty something thousand. So it kept me struggling again in my old age in order to have a home to live in.

Q: Well, Louise, thank you so much for that, for recounting that experience. I knew about it, and I knew how involved you had been in it. And I wanted that to be a part of the record. So let's move on now to something else.

Epperson: Okay.

Q: Aside from being a consumer of regular goods and services, in what ways did you participate in the economic life of the community?

Epperson: Well, many people came to me. This is why a lot of people called me a politician. I have never received one penny from any politician or anybody for anything that I've ever done. I have gone to politicians and asked for jobs for people. People that were sorely in need. And they have been granted to many constituents. That's one thing that I've been able to do is to get jobs from the private sector and the public sector. And I think that has been a help to some people.

Q: Right. Did you ever own or operate your own business?

Epperson: No. I did not. Always worked for somebody else.

Q: Now, Miss Epperson, when you first came to Newark and during your early years here, how did you get information on the news and events of the black community? Did you read a black newspaper, if so which one? Did you listen to black oriented radio stations, if so which one?

Epperson: The Afro-American was always our newspaper when I came to Newark. And we had

a couple of books. I can't even remember. The girl even sent me a clipping from one of the books way back in the 30s that I was in one of the books. And I'm not sure what I did with that. And that's not been long ago that she sent it to me. But we always had, we always had the black newspaper, the Afro-American. And we had always had Connie writing stories from different corners and things, Connie Woodruff. And, oh, I forgot to tell you. We always had, at that time, News and Views on the radio with Bernice Besch. Bernice Besch was one of the first persons that ever give me free access to the airwaves to talk about the dilemma of Newark. And she continued to help us up until she left.

Q: Other than Bernice Besch and News and Views, were there other black oriented radio stations.

Epperson: Not that I knew about. [Interruption for phone call]

Q: Miss Epperson, I had just asked you about black oriented radio stations and you talked about Bernice Besch and News and Views. And I was asking you if there were any other black oriented radio stations that you listened to that existed in Newark at that time. I seem to remember WWRAL, WBGO as having been black oriented stations. But, what outstanding blacks did you meet or hear about in Newark, like politicians or entertainers, or religious people like ministers, or that who were well know nationally? Did you ever meet any of those kind of people in Newark?

Epperson: Yes. It's just hard for me to remember names. But I'm trying to think of this minister that came from Atlanta, Georgia. He would come and speak to us. He was also head of one of those colleges in Atlanta, but I can't think of his name now.

Q: Was it Dr. Benjamin Mays?

Epperson: Yeah, Dr. Mays. Yes. That's who it was.

Q: What about any others? He was a college president. Was he a minister also?



Epperson: He was a minister also.

Q: I see.

Epperson: Yes. And at that time, who was he, too young to, he won the seat, but he was too young to take the seat. He's from Atlanta, Georgia, also. I saw his picture not long ago in the paper. I can't think of names at the moment.

Q: But there were some outstanding blacks who came to Newark for different occasions, different reasons down through the years I would imagine?

Epperson: Yeah. I guess so. I guess so. I wouldn't be a bit surprised.

Q: What about black people on the police force, or in the fire department, or social workers?

Epperson: Oh yes. We had black police force, they had black people on the police force. I just can't remember names now. But I know that there were black people on the police force, many of them.

Q: What about the fire department?

Epperson: I don't remember the fire department. I know in Atlantic City they had a whole squad of firemen that were black. And when we would go to Atlantic City, we'd break our necks to go meet them. Because they were black.

Q: What about the social workers? People who provided services to the persons who were on, like, public assistance of welfare we refer to it. Those persons who took care of that clientele. Were they black or white or were they mixed?

Epperson: Well, they always had some black persons fighting for that particular segment. That was way before Larry Starks took the jobs as.

Q: As director of health and welfare.

Epperson: And there was a woman over in deeds. I can't think of her name now. Black woman. She was over deeds, she lived in East Orange. I can't think of her name now.

Q: I don't remember.

Epperson: Oh yes, she was there. City Hall here. But I can't recall her name now. I'll call Bernice Besch. I betcha she'll remember.

Q: When people in the black neighborhoods got in trouble, who did they go to for help?

Epperson: Well, there wasn't too much trouble in those days.

Q: Well, if they had problems. Any kind of social problems, economic problems, did they?

Epperson: Well, most people, as I said, most people were Democrats, and most people would go to Larry Starks or Honey Ward or some of those type of people if they just got into it.

Q: Who was Honey Ward?

Epperson: Honey Ward was the Central Ward chairman of the --

Q: Democratic Party.

Epperson: -- Democrat Party.

Q: And Bill Stubbs was chairman of the Republican Party.

Epperson: Yes.

Q: How effective were they in helping people when they had, when they went to them?

Epperson: They were very good help. They were very good help.

Q: How was black Newark perceived by white Newark? Was the community seen as a ghetto, as a slum where black folk lived?

Epperson: I don't know what the white folks thought about us. [Laughter] I can't tell you that.

Q: Did all classes of African-Americans live in the same neighborhood? Like people who had the better jobs and people who had the?

Epperson: They lived in the same neighborhoods. We were all on equal footing. But after some of them got good jobs, better jobs, they moved away from us. Just like the white man did. They left us down in the ghettos.

Q: When they lived there, how did the whole community get along?

Epperson: Well, we got along okay with them as long as they were down here with us. But soon as they stepped on our shoulders and got up a few notches, that was out.

Q: Other than white store owners and other whites with a vested interest, a vested economic interest in Newark, do you recall any other whites having an interest in the black community?

Epperson: Yes. Up and down Press Street, every store was owned by some white person. But

they all catered to black people. Cause that's where the money was coming from. The black folks, they're the ones that bought all that stuff up and down Prince Street.

Q: These were people who did have a vested economic interest in Newark. But I mean were there any other like politicians or business owners, like the person who owned the big department stores down Newark, or the drug stores or the businesses down Newark. Or. Did any of those persons take any interest in the black community?

Epperson: Not that I know anything about if they did. You know, in those days we had St. Barnabas Hospital right around the corner from my house. It's out in Livingston now. And we had the Doctor's Hospital over on Avon Avenue that was run by black folks, black doctors.

Q: What stores downtown Newark did you shop?

Epperson: Well, I told you Ohrbach's, Bamberger's. We couldn't afford to go to Hanes except to look at the window. Stores like that.

Q: Do you remember any racial incidents or incidents of racial discrimination in Newark?

Epperson: Yes. I remember plenty. They had plenty places downtown in Newark that the black people in Newark didn't go to. They was really discriminated against. They just know that they wouldn't serve them and then they wouldn't go in there. You know, had a Child's Restaurant, it was called Child's down there. I know you couldn't even buy a hot dog in there. I know we fought very hard for the five and ten to serve in different departments. After they opened up the doors where we could have them, we said, we didn't go down there to eat their hot dogs. We had better hot dogs at home. We just wanted to know if we wanted to go in there we could. And it took a southern black to show the northern blacks that they were discriminated against. They didn't know.

Q: Now there is, there was a person on Springfield Avenue who was known as the Mayor of Springfield Avenue. Do you have any idea who that was?

Epperson: No I don't.

Q: What do you remember regarding such local personalities as William Ashby, who was the early black social worker; Meyer Ellingstein, who was Newark's first Jewish Mayor; Prosper Brewer, who was Newark's black policeman; and Irving Turner, Newark's first black elected officials? Did you know any of those?

Epperson: I knew all of them. Every person that you named, I knew them. And I had had contact with every person that you named. And I particular worked to get Irving Turner his first job. Went out getting people to register to vote and get him in. And I also worked very hard, and I think his name should be added to that list, is our first black judge, Hazlewood. He should be remembered in those times. Because we were working for Irving Turner and he was around the same time. I remember that very, very good. Very much. And I knew every one on whose name you called.

Q: Right. What was their general attitude toward the black community? Did they?

Epperson: They helped us. They did all they could to help us. As far as I knew.

Q: What do you remember regarding such black institutions as hospitals, you mentioned, was it the Community Hospital?

Epperson: Was what?

Q: The hospital, the black hospital that you talked about? Were there any others, aside from that particular one?

Epperson: Yes. There was a Kenney Hospital, also, on Kenney Street. That was black. That was owned by black.

Q: Black doctors:

Epperson: Yes.

Q: What about hotels and banks? Were there any such, any of those institutions in Newark?

Epperson: Well, I think the City Bank was the first black institution that I remember. And they tried to get another one on Waverly Avenue, near Avon over there. But it wasn't successful in getting enough depositors.

Q: Wasn't there a Baffoon Bank right at the intersection, at Springfield Avenue and Court Street there?

Epperson: Yes. Yes.

Q: I don't know how long it was there, but I think I do remember it having been there.

Epperson: Yes. Yes. I've forgotten that. That's true.

Q: How important were those institutions to the black community? Oh, what about hotels? You remember any black hotels being in Newark? I remember the Coleman.

Epperson: The Grand Hotel.

Q: Coleman was.

Epperson: Coleman. Yeah, Coleman's Hotel.

Q: How important would you say that those institutions were to the black community?

Epperson: I don't think that they were that important because they didn't play an important role. You know. Just like now, if I open something just for Louise Epperson, I don't help nobody. Then I haven't played a role. I have just helped myself.

Q: What do you recall regarding the kinds of music that you heard in black Newark?

Epperson: Oh, I loved the music then. We had jazz. We had jazz everywhere you went. And it was fantastic. It was very, very good.

Q: Do you remember listening to or seeing black musicians perform jazz or gospel or blues? And if so, what places did they play?

Epperson: Well, you know, I told you next to the church was a tavern. And they all played around at the taverns. They all did.

Q: You remember any particular outstanding black musicians that played in Newark?

Epperson: I can't remember. I put names down to try to remember. I know we used to hear Robert Banks, Savvoy Record Company. They played a lot of gospel music, a lot of gospel. Robert Banks and Lawrence Roberts. Leo Lumpkin. Fish, I think his name was Family or Family or something like that. I'd have to call Grace and ask her. But I remember the Fish. Ronald Baez, Connie Tipp used to play and sing. And I remember we could always depend upon Mary Birch to help out if we needed somebody.

Q: Who was that, Miss Birch?

Epperson: Miss Birch. Mary Birch.

Q: She was the founder of the Leaguers.

Epperson: That's right. But you know all of these things happened and they would do anything because everybody was trying to keep the jobs. You know. As I said before, the people like Jack Hicks, Russell Bingham, Cary Smith who is a great, great jazz singer. Cary today is fine. Been on Broadway several times. And people over in Europe just idol the ground she walks on. But we never hear anything about her here. Nothing. And I think it's a shame for Black History Month to be just folding up like that. It's as though that the people in Newark nobody has ever did anything.

Q: Louise, you were so busy trying to help our people move forward, or at least to hold on to what they had, what kind of leisure time activities did you participate in? What did you do for Louise?

Epperson: I never thought about Louise. Because as long as I was helping somebody and they were happy with it, it gave me inspiration to help somebody else. And I just kept going. I thrived on it. I didn't take much rest til I had to get knocked down with a heart attack in order to rest.

Q: What about sports in Newark? Did you ever hear of the Newark Eagles?

Epperson: Yes. I knew the Eagles very, very well. I knew the owner. I used to go down there to the ballgames. I knew all the Eagles. I used to really, really have a ball with the Eagles.

Q: Very interesting. Were there other black athletics or sports events that you attended?

Epperson: Nothing like the ballgames. Nothing like the ballgames.

Q: What do you recall regarding the seamy side of Newark, of black Newark?



Epperson: The what kind of side?

Q: The seamy side. Like the crooks and the bad folk. The prostitutes, the gamblers, the numbers runners and.

Epperson: Well, I knew the number runners. I didn't know anything about the crooks and I didn't know anything about the prostitutes. Until these days and times. I never thought about that. We could go all over Newark any time of day or night, and come home and leave our doors open. Nobody would bother you. It's not like that today.

Q: What do you remember regarding public education in Newark?

Epperson: Well, I always remember that the schools were open, the children would go. At that time they had truant officers. I don't know if they have them now or not. But you be sure that you don't let them catch you out of school when you're supposed to be in school. Everybody used to go school, to plays and things like that.

Q: What was the quality of education like in Newark in those days? Did the kids learn well or did they come out?

Epperson: I think they learned well. They didn't cut up like they do now. Kids didn't have to watch over their shoulders for guns and knives and things like that. I think they learned well then. It was better then than now.

Q: Do you have any idea how black students were treated by white teachers and white students in Newark?

Epperson: If they were treated badly, I never heard of it.

Q: What would you consider to be the five most important events or developments that have occurred in Newark during your residence here? For example, like strikes, political elections, riots or disturbances, or fires or natural disasters such as wind storms or tornadoes or snow storms, etc, and what about black immigration, black people moving from other areas and coming into Newark. Do you think that has been significant as far as the social and economic life in the City is concerned?

Epperson: I do think it has been significant. I think it has caused many changes. I know we had black people that come here from say, for instance, the Caribbean. Well, we went, we would go to the Caribbean on our vacations and things. I've had family that tried to run businesses in the Caribbean, and they could not hire their own people. They had to hire the Caribbean or whoever was there that was staying in their home town. But they come over here and they take all our jobs, and they work cheaper because they live differently from what we live. And some of them are very mean. You can't even speak to them. And I think that's pathetic because they brought to the shores just like we were in slavery. And it's mind boggling sometimes when I think about it. And when I see it too.

Q: What about some of the other things that I mentioned like labor strikes?

Epperson: Well, yes. Labor strikes are terrible. When I think about the way I see, especially now since the United Presbyterian Hospital has just closed down. All of those people out of work. That's the first time in my life I've ever heard tell a credit union going broke. Where people have deposited their money in credit unions. People have worked at that hospital for forty years, and they're service is nothing. They're too old to go anyplace else to work. I'm told when they declare bankruptcy, they don't have to give you anything. I don't know if that's true or not, but I've been told that. And I think that is mind boggling to anybody.

Q: What about political elections? Which ones do you think were more significant to African-Americans in Newark?

Epperson: What?

Q: No. Elections. Political elections.

Epperson: What about them?

Q: Which do you think were most significant political elections for black people in Newark?

Epperson: Well, I was so happy to see a black man in City Hall. I worked very hard to see that that come about. I am still disturbed over Dr. Walton coming into the city, a late comer, and attacking our councilman and everything. If they are doing wrong, then I think that they are elected by the people, of the people, and for the people, and the people should stand up and say something. Not just one person that's after a political job and stirring up trouble. Because I as a senior am living in this senior citizen complex, and I have gone to the City Hall for many favors, and the councilman have never turned me down. And I'm sure that there are others that would say the same thing. And I don't mind speaking up for them.

Q: What about fires or any significance? Do you remember any fires that caused a lot of damage or?

Epperson: Yes. I remember fires. I've seen fires. I've read about fires that have caused great damage to families, especially poor people who had kerosene stoves that had not other way of heating except that way. They lose everything. And they have nothing. And I have to say one thing. The Red Cross always comes through, no matter who, and I like that.

Q: What about natural disasters such as tornadoes or storms or snow storms?

Epperson: Thank God we live in the part of the country that we don't have too many of those. We have had many snow storms. We have had many storms. I had my own house the roof to

blow one wintertime. It is a terrible disaster when that thing happens to you, but it can happen any place. And I think we are very fortunate. We are not with earthquakes shaking us, causing fires and causing hazards. And here the people do try to help each other when this disaster come about.

Q: Now, I want to ask you to take your time and answer this next question because I think it's very important. In what major ways has Newark changed since you first arrived here, and how do you view the changes that have occurred?

Epperson: Well, when I first arrived here I wasn't too interested in anything. I was very young. And all I wanted to do was to just find some people to have fun with. That I did. And I gained friends that I've kept through the years. And I'm very happy about that. I've seen many changes have come about in the time that I came to Newark. I see many disasters that shouldn't be, that be. I see people, and in fact, I've been a victim of robbery two or three times. And I've seen the time that.

END SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO; BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

Q: Miss Epperson, I was asking you about the kinds of changes that you have noticed in Newark from the time you came until now.

Epperson: Well, living where I'm living, I sit in my window sometime and watch, seeing walking down the street, three kids snatched their pocketbooks. I never saw that happen before. I see where people are prisoners are in their own homes because of all the chaos in the streets. You can't afford to be out at night. You can hardly afford to be out in the daytime. Because now they don't regard, they just disregard everything and everybody. Sometime I think the only thing, in fact, I'm sure the only thing that's gonna save us here in Newark is more prayers. I think we should have to call upon God to help us more. And if more people started to pray, and make this just a praying city, instead of so much politics, I think we'll get along better.

Q: Do you think African-Americans in Newark are better off socially, economically, and educationally than they were when you first came to Newark? And what about education institutions? We have talked about the College of Medicine and Dentistry. But what about the Rutgers campus and the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Essex County College? None of those were here when you first came, were they?

Epperson: That's right. None of them were here. Rutgers was in New Brunswick, but not here.

Q: Not in Newark.

Epperson: Not in Newark. Well I think this whole city's an educational city. Cause everywhere you look there's some either day care centers or something where for the children to come and learn, where we didn't have pre-school and all of that stuff when I first came here. But they have it now. Therefore our citizens should be stronger and better instead of weaker. That's what I feel.

Q: But now do you see any evidence that any part of our community is stronger or better now because of those institutions than they were before? You see, because we tend to look at the negative. And like you said before, we very seldom those persons who did something worth remembering or people who contributed to the betterment of the community. But, I'm just wondering, do you think the institutions that have come to Newark and the people who have participated there. I mean a lot of jobs were created, and a lot of the people who work there commute into the city and out at night, but do you think that they have made any positive contributions to the black community?

Epperson: Well, I can't say that they haven't. Because there are some instances that you can cite, but they're so far and in between until you can't see the effectiveness of it. That's the way I feel.

Q: Right. What traditions or celebrations or events in Newark that you witnessed in the past no longer exist?

Epperson: Well, I know we used to the Christmas Attic Parade that I don't see anymore. We have to used black heritage parades. I don't see them anymore. So many things that we used to really enjoy that no longer exist.

Q: Do you have any idea what happened to them or why they no longer exist?

Epperson: Well, everybody tell me it's money matters. So I guess money must be still ruling the world.

Q: How do you feel about the disappearance of those things?

Epperson: I feel very sad about it. Because the young people today should know about these things. And the young people today don't know anything about what we older people have done. That's why they say we've done nothing. Because they haven't been taught anything. And the schools, they have black people to do many things, but I think. I was looking because I just found a paper stuck in one of these things. [Pause] Here. Black scientist's inventions enrich all of our lives. This comes from Abbey's Star Ledger, December the fourth, 95. And it tells you of, tells you about a. It reminds you about, the readers about the predicament the world would have without the contributions made by Afro-Americans. It is indeed a free world to not to have face black America, but if you don't, I suggest you boycott blood plasma. It was a black man brought about blood plasma. Attribute the ways of perceiving it, it was discovered by Dr. Charles Drew. You would also boycott the portrait x-ray machine, most invigorate system, and the self-starting gasoline motor. And the pacemaker thermostat of. [pause]

Q: Well that's okay, since our tape is running and I don't want to get too much space in here if we can help it. Let me just ask you this Miss Epperson, when do you feel black life in Newark reached its highest peak and what was so good about that particular time?

Epperson: Well, I think it reached its highest peak when Ken Gibson became mayor of the City of

Newark cause people been dancing in the street all night long saying this is my city.

Q: How did life change for black folk in Newark after Ken was elected mayor?

Epperson: Well, it's the way you see it is now. Not only when Ken was, but Sharpe James is now our mayor also. People are just complacent and don't seem to care. They seem to be fighting over everything.

Q: But do you think life was better for black folk in Newark after Ken and Sharpe were elected than before?

Epperson: Yes I think they were. They were permitted to go anywhere that their heart desired, the pocketbook allowed.

Q: What do you feel black life in Newark reached its lowest point, and what was bad about that time?

Epperson: Well, I think it has reached its lowest point when we don't have jobs for the children. We don't have jobs for the head of the household. We let our children go out and sell drugs, and we know it because those children can't afford to Mercedes Benz and all at fifteen and sixteen and know they're doing something wrong. I think we've come to a very low point when we accept these type of things.

Q: So you think then that now, the time in which we live, is probably the lowest point for life in Newark?

Epperson: Yes I do. Right.

Q: Okay, what about Louise Scott? Did you know Mrs. Scott?

Epperson: Yes. I did.

Q: What do you recall about her?

Epperson: Well, I recall her receiving payments on many, many houses to buy other houses and having twenty people waiting for apartments. She was great at doing that.

Q: Wait a minute now. Say that again. She did what?

Epperson: She took deposit on houses that she did not own. And she had many, many people waiting for houses. But on the other hand, she bought many houses and gave people places to stay that didn't have anyplace to stay. And I can say that what Mrs. Scott did was something that none of us went out to do. She gave hope to many people. Many people. She opened a beauty school there. She took students if they had money or didn't have money. She opened a hotel, and she rented rooms to people who could afford it and those who could not afford it. And she gave of herself to many, many things that I know Louise Scott.

Q: So you knew her personally?

Epperson: Yes. I knew her personally.

Q: Did you and she have any kind of relationship where you saw each other on a more of less regular basis?

Epperson: Oh, no. We didn't have that kind of relationship. But if there was anything going on at the auditorium, she would call me and make sure that I came. And I would go. And she would have, she had for a long time Bernice broadcasts from the Krueger's auditorium. All the programs, the News and Views, you could hear it there and go there in person to see it. And I thought that was fantastic.



Q: How do you think the black community perceived her? What did the black community think of her?

Epperson: Well, I think everybody loved her really. I never heard any bad things about Louise Scott.

Q: Did you ever visit her home?

Epperson: Yes. I have. On several occasions.

Q: What do you know about the area where the mansion is located? What kind of people did live there and what kind of people live there now?

Epperson: Well, nobody lives there now, except the. You mean that area.

Q: The area. Yes.

Epperson: Well, only that big shots lived in that neighborhood. You know, we had like, I forgot the name of the club where all the doctors owned across the street from Scott's place. I've forgotten the name of that too.

Q: I think, the Mason Temple was in there.

Epperson: I don't know. But it wasn't called that then. But I remember doctors lived in the two or three houses across from the Krueger's auditorium. Larry Starks, she was on one corner. By the way, I heard that Larry had left all of her property to the?

Q: The Krueger Mansion?

Epperson: Krueger. Is that true?

Q: I don't know.

Epperson: I heard that. In fact, she had told me that herself before she deceased that she was going to do that.

Q: This was Larry Starks you say?

Epperson: Yes.

Q: Oh. No. I hadn't heard that.

Epperson: Renee Starks.

Q: Oh, Renee Starks, not Larry.

Epperson: Renee.

Q: I'll have to find out.

Epperson: Yeah. You should find out. Because she used to talk to me about it a lot. And she said that's what she's going to do with the first three houses.

Q: Did you know any of the people who occupied the Scott Mansion before Mrs. Scott moved in?

Epperson: No. I did not.

Q: Okay. These are my final questions now, Miss Epperson. How would you sum up your experience of living in Newark?

Epperson: My experience of living in Newark has been very rich to me. I have met a lot of fine people, as well as a lot of skunks. And if you know the difference in people, you'll know what I'm talking about. I have been able to meet the highest of highest and the lowest of lowest. And I have friends on both sides. And I never look down on any man unless it's a [?].

Q: If you had your life to live over, would you live in Newark would you live in Newark? And tell me why you would or would not.

Epperson: Yes. If I had it to live over, I would live in Newark. I love Newark and I love its people. I just love doing for people and seeing smiles come over their face. That's my reward. And I think doing for others is the price that you have to pay for the land that you reside on while you're here on this earth.

Q: Well, I have to tell you that I have always regarded you as one of the beautiful people. I've always thought very highly of you. And I'm glad that you have given me the opportunity of coming and sitting down and talking with you and listening to you. I have enjoyed this no end. And my final question to you is there anything that I did not cover that you would like to tell me about Louise Epperson?

Epperson: Yes. One thing that you didn't ask me about. You probably didn't know about it. While I was working at the University of Medicine and Dentistry, one morning I woke up to a southern white voice saying, good morning, Miss Epperson. And I said good morning. Who may you be? He said my name is James Massie, and I came from Texas. I just finished school and this is my first job. I said, well, welcome to Newark. We're very happy to have you. He left his wife at home, and he was my next door neighbor in the college, office to office. I invited him to my house because he said, we were talking about foods and I talked about black eyed peas and rice,

stuff like that, and he was accustomed to that. And I came in one morning and brought some hominy grits to him. And he was just thrilled to death. And he said, I'm gonna adopt you as my mama. He said, you're gonna be my mama. He said nobody has ever fed me like this except at home with mama. And we got to be very good friends. And when his wife came later, they had one little girl. And they asked me if I would be the godmother for this little girl. Her name was Heather. And I am the baby's godmother. He left from here. Went over to New York to a Jewish hospital to be administrator. We corresponded across the river every weekend. Either they were at my house or I was across the river to their house. We got to be very good friends. He left from there and he went to New Orleans. He gave me several trips to New Orleans to visit him and his wife and baby. He left from there and he went to Chicago. And today he is in Chicago. He calls himself my son. And he calls me every week to see how I'm doing. And one day I got a letter from American Red Cross saying I now have nine units of blood reserved in my name from Jim Massie. If I never need blood, I never have to worry about it.

Q: Well, see I told you I considered you as being one of the beautiful people. And one other question that I did forget to ask you. Who did you get married to when you first married?

Epperson: Who did, Jim?

Q: No. You. Who did you marry? When you got old enough to get married, who'd you marry?

Epperson: I married Hal Epperson from Elizabeth.

Q: Well, okay. Where did you meet him and how did you meet him?

Epperson: I met Hal Epperson through Russell Bano. We were going to a ballgame one day, and that's the way I met him. He always worked at Krueger's, Budweiser.

Q: How long did you know him before you got married to him?

Epperson: About a year.

Q: So now, Louise, from this point on what do you hope for for Louise Epperson and what do you hope for the future of the City of Newark?

Epperson: Well, I'm hoping that the Board of Education will come back to Newark, and the citizens run it and not the State. I'm hoping to see the government straighten things out with their perks to give them back to the people. I'm hoping that we can love more, pray more, be more together, and this will bring a lot of happiness to a lot of people.

Q: Well, I have to say that I agree with all of that one hundred percent Louise. And I just want to say one more time, thank you so much for letting me come and for being a part of this. And I just want you to know that when the center is finished and open, these recordings will be a part of the history of Newark so that young people can come into that center and know who preceded them and how they got to where they are in terms of Newark. And I thank you so much. And I love you.

Epperson: Thank you for coming.

Q: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW